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Administration Sidesteps Genocide Label in Rwanda

By Thomas W. Lippman
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The Clinton administration said yesterday that "acts of genocide" have occurred in Rwanda but deliberately stopped short of saying the tribal slaughter there is itself genocide—a declaration that would require U.S. and other foreign intervention under a 1948 international convention.

The U.S. statement immediately drew protests from human rights groups and some members of Congress. They urged the United States

to honor its obligation and act against leaders in Rwanda of the majority Hutu tribe, which has been accused of carrying out most of the killings. The victims, estimated to number in the hundreds of thousands, are predominantly members of the minority Tutsi tribe.

The 1948 convention banning genocide, which the United States signed only in 1989, bars "acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" by violence. Signatories are obliged to "prevent and punish" such acts.

State Department spokeswoman Christina Shelly said, "Based on the evidence we have seen from observations on the ground, we have every reason to believe that acts of genocide have occurred in Rwanda." But as a legal matter under the convention, she said, "clearly not all of the killings that have taken place in Rwanda are killings to which you might apply that label."

In an exchange with reporters about a New York Times report yesterday that administration spokesmen have been instructed to avoid the "genocide" label, Shelly was

asked, "How many acts of genocide does it take to make genocide?"

"That's just not a question that I'm in a position to answer," she replied.

The exchange echoed many that have occurred over the past two years as members of Congress pressed the administration to say that "ethnic cleansing" of Muslims

and Croats by Serb militias in Bosnia is genocide. As with Bosnia, critics said the administration is engaging in semantics to avoid taking difficult or unpopular military action.

Rwanda, a small, landlocked nation with no strategic value to the United States, would probably not meet the criteria for U.S. intervention that the Clinton administration promulgated after the 1992-1993 debacle in Somalia.

"I believe it is genocide, and we need to stop sitting on the sidelines," said Rep. Tony P. Hall (D-Ohio), who recently visited camps in Tanzania where hundreds of thousands of Rwandans have sought refuge. "They keep avoiding calling it genocide," Hall said of the administration, "because they know that as a ratifier [of the convention] we are required by international law to find the parties responsible and go after them."

In Rwanda, Hall said, "We need to go after the people who are guilty. We know who they are, where they are."

Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, said in a letter to President Clinton yesterday that since the carnage began "only 47 days ago, Human Rights Watch/Africa has gathered evidence that perhaps as many as 500,000 helpless civilians, mostly of the Tutsi minority, have been slaughtered. How can this be anything but genocide?"

The Clinton administration has provided more than \$68 million in humanitarian aid for victims of Rwanda's tribal conflict, a State Department official said. But that aid has been distributed mostly to refugees outside Rwanda.

The only U.S. military commitment is to lease 50 armored personnel carriers to a United Nations peacekeeping force, but the lease was delayed by a disagreement over whether tracked or wheeled vehicles should be used, a U.S. official said.

Shelly said there has been extensive discussion of the genocide issue within the administration, and between the administration and the United Nations.

She said the U.N. Human Rights commission has appointed a "special rapporteur for Rwanda specifically to compile the information on possible violation of human rights and on acts which constitute breaches of international humanitarian law and crimes against humanity, including acts of genocide. His preliminary report, which is due later this month ... is something that we have to wait for," Shelly said.

Herman Cohen, a former assistant secretary of state for African affairs, said in The Washington Post last week that this policy allows "a planned, systematic murder" to continue.

Secretary Christopher



Ann -

What are our obligations under this provision?
(Ask L.)

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